TESTIMONY OF DOUGLAS LOWENSTEIN, PRESIDENT
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BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE
ON THE
EFFECTS OF INTERACTIVE VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN
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This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Interactive Digital Software Association[1] the trade body representing U.S. video and computer game software companies that publish games for use in the home. In 1999, the industry generated $6.1 billion in retail software sales. IDSA=s 32 members account for 90% of the edutainment and entertainment software sold in the US.

I apologize for not being able to appear before the Committee in person. However, I had a long standing prior commitment in Arizona which could not be rescheduled. I hope the testimony and attachments which follow will be included in the Committee record, and I look forward to a continuing dialogue with the Members about these important issues.

The subject of today=s hearing is The Effects of Interactive Violence on Children. I certainly understand the interest in this topic in the aftermath of tragic school shootings over the past few years, as well as the frenzied media reports - often inaccurate and misleading **B** about interactive entertainment in the months after Littleton. This is an important topic which deserves a fair and balanced discussion.

By far the most exhaustive and objective analysis of this subject was released this past December by the Government of Australia in a study entitled AComputer Games and Australians Today.@ This detailed report, which is provided as an Appendix to my testimony, stands out above all others for two reasons: first, it was carried out by a government with a history of tough regulation of entertainment content for the purpose of determining whether government regulation is merited; second, unlike some of those who will appear before you today, it was written by authors who lack preconceived points of view on the issue of whether violent games lead to aggressive behavior. I think it is especially helpful to the Committee since it provides an independent, unbiased, peer-based evaluation of some of the research you will hear about today. I will discuss this study in more detail later in my testimony, but let me quote to you here the key conclusion.

> AThe accumulating evidence **B** provided largely by researchers keen to demonstrate the games= undesirable effects **B** does indicate that <u>it is very hard to find such effects and that they are unlikely to be substantial</u> (emphasis added).@

[1] IDSA=s members only publish software for the home. The arcade game business is a different sector with its own representatives.

The Computer and Video Game Industry Today

Any dialogue on the effects of violent video and computer games on children must be carried out with an understanding of the broader context of the interactive entertainment industry, its products, and its customers. So before addressing the specific question of what the prevailing research tells us about the effects of violent video and computer games on children, I want to discuss briefly some facts about the interactive entertainment industry as it stands today.

There are six critical points to understand:

Point One: The most frequent users of computer and video games are adults, not kids. This is a surprise to many who still perceive the industry as a toy-based business appealing to adolescent males. But in fact, 70% of the most frequent users of PC games are over 18; and 38% of these are over 36. The picture is similar for video game consoles: 57% of the most frequent users are over 18, and 20% are over 36. Those products that contain violent content, and it is a minority of the total produced (see below), are made to appeal to this adult population.

Point Two: The vast majority of games do not contain significant levels of violence, and the vast majority of top selling games are largely non-violent. Of the top 20 best selling games in 1999, none carried a Mature rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), and only five carried a Teen rating. Looking at games sold by type, the data shows that just over 5% of all games sold last year were in the so-called Ashooter@ category which received so much attention after Columbine, and this category is so broadly defined that it includes such benign games as a Star Wars space war title and a version of the classic arcade game Asteroids. In fact, if one were to focus strictly on games like Doom, their percentage of the total market is even lower.

Point Three: There is a mass market for games today which crosses all ages, genders, and tastes. The notion that the industry should homogenize content to appeal only to young users makes as much sense as encouraging book publishers to stop publishing Steven King novels and only issue books appropriate for young readers.

Point Four: While the market is diverse, 70% of all games made are rated by the ESRB as appropriate for everyone. Only nine percent of the more than 6,000 products rated by the ERB have earned a Mature rating reflecting the presence of significant levels of violence. ESRB ratings have been lauded for their accuracy and reliability by such diverse observers as Sen. Joe Lieberman and child advocate Peggy Charren. And we know these ratings work when parents know about them and use them. Last summer, a survey conducted for the ESRB by the highly regarded Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. found that 73% of the parents who were aware of the ESRB rating system find it helpful in making informed purchasing decisions. We also know that nine out of ten games are

actually purchased by adults for their kids so they can, if they choose, control the games their kids play. Finally, the Hart survey revelaed that three out of four parents under the age of 44 provide a significant level of supervision over the games their kids play. So the control really is in their hands.

Point Five: Between 1991-97, video game sales surged 128%. Meanwhile, between 1993-97, a period covering the most dramatic growth in video game sales, juvenile violent crime fell 40%. No one would say that video games are responsible for falling crime rates. But these numbers do suggest that those who point to games as a leading culprit in youth violence do not have the facts on their side.

Point Six: Many of the games sold here which have prompted concern about the effects of interactive entertainment on children are sold all over the world. In fact, in some countries, even more violent games are available. Yet, despite growth rates in foreign markets similar to those in the US, youth violence in these countries does not even approach the levels in our country. If interactive entertainment causes violent behavior, why is violent crime among juveniles so low in foreign markets with the identical products? This suggests we need to look far deeper to identify the causes of youth violence than games.

Research on Interactive Entertainment

Let me now turn to the academic research. I have attached as an Appendix to my testimony a report analyzing the research on video game violence and other issues prepared at IDSA=s request by Jeffrey Goldstein, Ph.D., Department of Social and Organizational Psychology at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands. Dr. Goldstein has authored and edited numerous books on media violence, including his latest, AWhy We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment@, and is a Fellow of both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Society.

I will leave the scientific analysis to Dr. Goldstein and the Australian Government=s study, also attached as an Appendix. But I want to make a few general points.

Australian Research

Let me turn here to the Australian study. This study updated a 1995 study conducted by Kevin Durkin, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Western Australia. In that study, which reviewed all literature on the effects of video games on users, Durkin concluded, AOverall, evidence is limited, but so far does not lend strong support to the claims that computer games play promotes aggressive behavior.@

As noted earlier, the new study reaches much the same conclusion after evaluating

research carried out since the 1995 study was published.

A few key points from the Australia study are worth reporting. First, government researchers found in a national survey that Amost people associate positive feelings such as enjoyment, happiness, exhilaration, relaxation, and challenge with playing computer games@: and that Ayoung players report that aggressive content is not the central attraction of games. Many players said that they perceive the aggressive content as fantastic and preposterous, with the result that they do not take it seriously; they do not perceive their own actions as harming others since they do not believe the characters are real or suffer pain.@ This punctures the oft-repeated statement that kids prefer violent games or that they take them seriously.

I want to cite briefly a few important studies covered by the Australians. Derek Scott, as reported in the Journal of Psychology, had hypothesized that the more aggressive games subjects played, the more aggressive they would become. He set out to prove this point of view, and failed. In fact, Scott found that the moderately aggressive games substantially <u>decreased</u> feelings of aggression, whereas the highly aggressive game resulted in no more of an increase in aggression than the non aggressive game. AResults are discussed in terms of a general lack of support for the commonly held view that playing aggressive computer games causes an individual to feel more aggressive,@ Scott wrote. Therev are several other studies which have sought to prove thyat the more aggressive the game played, the more significant the impact on behavior, and the have not been able to demonstrate this link, suggesting that there is not nexus between the level of aggression in a game and behavior outside it.

The Australian authors also note a 1997 study by Dutch researchers Van Schie and Wiegman who believed that the more users were exposed to violent games, the more aggressively they would behave. In fact, they reported, no relationship was found between the amount of play and aggressiveness.

In sum, the Australian Government study concludes that, ADespite several attempts to find effects of aggressive content in either experimental studies or field studies, at best only weak and ambiguous evidence has emerged.@

<u>Research Methodology</u>

In evaluating any research on this topic, pro or con, it is important to carefully evaluate the methodology, definitions, and interpretation of the data. In this regard, Dr. Goldstein notes: ANeither the quantity nor the quality of research on video games does much to inspire confidence in solid conclusions about their effects. Nearly every study suffers from vague definitions (of violence or aggression), ambiguous measurements (confusing aggressive play with aggressive behavior), questionable measures of aggression (such as blasts of noise or self-reports of prior aggression), or overgeneralizations of the data.@

Take, for example, the issue of how aggression is defined in the studies. Psychologists define violence or aggression as Athe intentional injury of another person.@ Yet, in video games, there is neither intent to injure nor a living victim. Nonetheless, some researchers loosely claim that the goal of certain games is to Akill@ opponents. But there is no literal killing and it is a massive leap of logic to suggest that vaporizing an animated character leads to or causes real world killing.

Another flaw in some research on this topic lies in how the research is carried out. Many of them, for example, are conducted in lab settings which do not replicate even remotely the environment and experience of those who play games for entertainment.

Dr. Goldstein writes: AExperiments that claim to study the effects of playing electronic games rarely study play at all. In reality, a game player chooses when and what to play, and enters in a different frame of mind than someone who is required to >play= on demand. Some have argued that the link between media violence and aggressive behavior is as strong as the link between cigarette smoking and cancer. This is not so. We can measure the presence or absence of disease with reasonable precision, but we cannot easily or reliably measure aggressive behavior in laboratory settings. We have only indirect and often questionable measures of aggression at our disposal.@

It is true that some research, including some you may hear about today, claims that video games lead to aggressive behavior in the real world. But often these are conclusions and speculation not supported by the underlying research. It is argued, for example, that video games reinforce murderous behavior! Last time I checked, murder was the taking of a human being=s life. Equating that to shooting alien creatures is totally unsubstantiated, and requires one to assume that the player will believe that what is permitted in the fantasy world he or she voluntarily entered is sanctioned in real life.

In fact, rather than suggesting that playing violent games leads to aggressive behavior in the real world, at best there is some weak evidence that this activity may lead to more aggressive play. In 1999, British researcher Mark Griffiths reviewed the literature on the subject and noted that what some researchers report as aggressive behavior is really only an increase in aggressive play **B** such as mock battles or running around making believe you=re killing aliens **B** with no intent to injure, as required by the standard psychological definition of aggression. This point cannot be overemphasized. There is a world of difference between running around making believe you=re killing aliens, or martial arts play fighting, and picking up a real weapon and shooting your friends. <u>There is not a shred of evidence in the academic literature to support the allegation that a violent video game leads to aggressive behavior in real life.</u>

Some researchers do claim that they have established a link between playing a violent game and aggressive behavior, such as Anderson and Dill. But their measure of aggressive behavior is not evidence of an actual violent act or the actual intent to injure someone, but the intensity and duration of noise blasts initiated by their subjects. I am not a psychologist but I would suggest that basing a conclusion that violent games lead to aggressive behavior on how loud and long someone blows a horn is not a sound basis for policy or pronouncements. Another measure used in this research is reaction time to aggressive words flashed on a screen after playing a violent game. A faster response was presumed to indicate aggressive thoughts. But it means nothing of the sort, anymore than if one played a golf game and then responded faster to the word Aputter@ means that you have golf on the brain. This kind of weak data represents the high water mark for research seeking to establish that violent video games lead to aggressive behavior, and it is extremely weak and ambiguous at best, and is contradicted by other research.

Yet another weakness in some of the research is that it fails to control for the pre-existing tendencies that subjects bring into the research. Griffiths points out that more aggressive children may be drawn to more violent games. And the Australian authors suggest that Ait would appear plausible that the direction of effect is from player to game. Computer games cannot turn players into boys. A more reasonable interpretation is that people with certain characteristics seek out certain types of games. It remains uncertain whether involvement in aggressive games by already aggressive individuals contributes to the exacerbation of their aggressive tendencies, provides a harmless avenue for its discharge, or makes no difference.@

Television vs. Interactive Entertainment

Another statement often made about video games is that one can extrapolate the effects of television research to computer games. This is not only bad science, it may be wildly misleading. One difference between video games and TV is that video game players exert control over what takes place on the screen. They are participants in an interactive system that allows them to regulate the pace and character of the game. This, in turn, gives them increased control over their own emotional states during play. A substantial body of research demonstrates that perceived control over events reduces their emotional or stressful impact.

Military Simulators

Over the last year, much attention has been paid in Congress and the media to claims that the military=s use of video game technology in training suggests that these games when used in the home train kids to kill. There is no evidence to support this wild claim, the purveyor of it has absolutely no research on which the claim is based, and the Pentagon itself dismisses the notion that it uses simulators to teach soldiers to kill. I will not dwell on this issue here, but will be happy to provide detail on this claim should the Committee desire.

Proactive Steps by the Video and Computer Game Industry

Does this mean we do nothing? The answer is no. Last Spring, I testified before this Committee and pledged to take a series of steps to address concerns about violent video games, including stepping up promotion of the ESRB, working with retailers to uphold the ratings at the point of sale, and addressing concerns about video game advertising. We have redeemed all of these pledged.

Our industry has been and continues to be extremely proactive in addressing concerns about the content of the small minority of products which give rise to the concerns covered in this hearing. We agree that some games are not appropriate for young children. That=s precisely what the ESRB ratings tell consumers. The single most meaningful step industry and government can take to protect children from games that may not be appropriate for them is to educate parents about how to use ESRB ratings.

To that end, the ESRB mounted a major campaign last holiday season to raise awareness and use of its ratings. This campaign included paid ads in national publications with significant parent readership. It also included a PSA featuring golf superstar Tiger Woods encouraging parents to ACheck the Ratings@ before buying games for their kids. ESRB also reached out to various national groups such as the PTA, Mothers Against Violence in America, and the YMCA and YWCA to distribute information about ESRB ratings to their constituents.

Another major element of the effort was to encourage retailers to carry information about ESRB ratings in their stores, and to adopt policies to uphold the ratings at the point of sale by not selling Mature or Adult Only games to persons under 17. Such national chains as Toys >R Us, Babbages, Electronics Boutique, and Funcoland all agreed to either actively restrict sales of AM@ rated games to persons under 17 or to use their best efforts to prevent such sales. In addition, the ESRB printed and distributed over 5 million brochures on how to use ESRB ratings to retailers.

Separately, the three major video game console hardware companies B Nintendo, Sega, and Sony B all agreed this Fall to include in their hardware packages information on the ESRB, a step which put critical ratings information into the hands of millions of new consumers this holiday season.

IDSA was active in other areas as well. This Fall, our Board of Directors created a new Advertising Review Council within the independent ESRB organization to develop and enforce an expanded advertising Code which for the first time includes content standards and various restrictions on the placement of ads for video and PC games. The new ARC opened its doors for business February 1. The ARC has secured support for its content guidelines from the three major video

game magazine chains who have agreed to adopt the ARC code as their internal standards and practices.

We're also pleased that the ESRB reached an agreement late last year with AOL in which AOL will adopt the ESRB ratings on its game service, a major step toward expanding ESRB's Internet presence.

We also welcome the study by the Surgeon General of the United States into the causes of youth violence, and will cooperate with that office as it proceeds.

Late last year, the IDSA conducted research asking parents who is responsible for controlling the video games children play. The overwhelming majority of respondents said it is up to the parents. Our industry will continue to make products that appeal to people of all tastes and interests. Some of these will not be appropriate for younger consumers. But absent unconstitutional restrictions on content, and absent any compelling scientific research showing that playing violent games is harmful, the best way to ensure that kids don't play games that are not suitable for them is to maximize parental awareness and use of the existing rating system. Our industry pledges to you that we will continue to actively promote the ESRB system to increase its utilization by parents, and we hope you and others who share your concerns will join us in that ongoing campaign.

Conclusion

While the subject of this hearing is the effects of violent interactive games on children, I want to briefly point out that there is a growing body of evidence that video games have many positive effects on players, including enhancing educational performance, improving spatial skills, improving cognitive development, and as therapeutic tools to treat attention deficit disorders, among other things. I hope we can address these benefits at some future hearing rather than continually and exclusively focusing on the issue of violence.

You will hear from witnesses who have generally expressed concern about the effects of interactive entertainment on children. We did provide the Committee with the names of other experts who do not share these views, and we were disappointed that none of them were asked to appear, or that the Committee did not seek out those with different views on its own. For this reason, we have included two additional submissions which evaluate all of the current research on the topic and reach the conclusion that there is no compelling research which supports the belief that playing violent video games in the real world causes aggressive behavior in the real world. Put another way, there is no scientific basis to argue that entering the fantasy world of Doom in the home using a mouse causes players to gun down their friends in the school yard.

But even if one were to agree with those who believe there is cause for concern

about the effects of violent entertainment on children, the question is what can be done about it? Video games and computer games are protected forms of expression under our Constitution. Some may not like particular games, but the case law is clear that efforts by government to regulate violent content is unconstitutional. For this reason, I appreciate the fact that Senator Brownback has publicly said that this hearing is not for the purpose of pursuing legislation to regulate the video game or entertainment industries. Thank you.